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UNCLAS ABU DHABI 000432

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP
AMMAN FOR ESTH HUB (BHALLA)
STATE PLEASE PASS USTR (JBUNTIN, JDOHERTY)

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PREL, PINR, AMGT, TF, AE
SUBJECT: TFFLU01: UAE H1N1 RESPONSE

REFS: A) ABU DHABI
B) STATE 44254

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The UAEG has taken a number of steps to combat the spread of H1N1 virus to the UAE and reassure the public. Interagency task forces have been established and are sharing information about their efforts. Residents are concerned, but with no confirmed cases in the UAE, remain calm. END SUMMARY.

UAEG EFFORTS

¶2. (SBU) Despite active engagement by the FAS Agricultural Trade Office (ATO), the first public UAEG response to H1N1 influenza was a General Secretariat of Municipalities (GSM) decision to ban pork imports on April 27 (reftels). GSM officials will review the ban on May 5, but there is little indication it will be quickly rescinded. Minister of Health Humaid Al Qattami has quoted WHO guidance that H1N1 is not transmitted from eating pork products, and this fact has also been printed in local newspapers.

¶3. (SBU) On April 27, Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed instructed that a Supervisory Committee on Combating H1N1 be created under the chairmanship of Minister of Health Al Qattami. The Supervisory Committee includes representatives of the Ministry of Health, the Environment Agency-Abu Dhabi, the Department of Health-Abu Dhabi, Ministry of Water and Environment, and Dubai Department of Health and Medical Services (DOHMS). Al Qattami immediately established a Technical Committee chaired by MOH Director General (deputy-equivalent) Dr. Ali Shakar. On April 29, the Technical Committee -- which includes federal and local health officials -- announced a variety of steps, including the installation of thermal scanners at Dubai and Abu Dhabi airports and stockpiling of antiviral medications. DOHMS will use its own assets, rather than federal institutions, to treat any diagnosed cases or quarantine any suspected cases, e.g. with travelers entering at Dubai International.

¶4. (SBU) Minister Al Qattami attended the May 2 Gulf Cooperation Council ministers of health meeting in Doha. On May 3, the Ministerial Council for Services, headed by Minister for Presidential Affairs Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed, approved a unified strategy to address "swine flu." At the meeting, MOH Al Qattami announced the establishment of a dedicated website with local and international H1N1 information. While the website does appear to be launched as of May 4, the Ministry of Health developed an online newsletter (http://www.moh.gov.ae/en/Swine_Flu_News_Lett_er-En.pdf) that includes UAEG response, relevant links, and FAQs.

PUBLIC REACTION

¶5. (SBU) As there have been no reported H1N1 cases in the UAE or Gulf region, local residents are concerned but not panicked. Local

hospital contacts report that persons are presenting themselves to emergency rooms with flu symptoms, but none have to date tested positive for Influenza-A. While basic typing of influenza by nasal swab is possible at local labs (with results available in two hours), specific identification of the H1N1 virus requires overseas testing. Currently, Sheikh Khalifa Medical City -- Abu Dhabi's principal care point for infectious diseases -- uses a lab in France, with results available in 24 hours. To date, no cases have required the secondary overseas testing.

¶6. (SBU) Local pharmacies report increased demand for Tamiflu and many are sold out of the drug. The UAE MOH has designated Tamiflu as a controlled substance, but many pharmacies in Abu Dhabi will (inappropriately) sell it without a prescription. Pharmacists tell EmbOffs that all Tamiflu available has an October 2009 expiry date. MOH officials have stated the drug licensing department is fast-tracking applications from local manufacturers to increase available stocks.

¶7. (SBU) Contacts -- both Emirati and expatriate -- continue to express concern about the spread of H1N1 influenza in the UAE. Fears are exacerbated by the fact that UAE citizens and expatriates (who represent 80 percent of the population) travel often and millions of passengers transit the UAE, particularly through Dubai. While some are delaying travel and stocking up on Tamiflu, most contacts are concerned but not panicked.
GREENE